Election Data Services

PART 3
RECOMMENDATIONS ON
FUTURE DATA COLLECTION

As we processed and analyzed the survey results, we developed a number of recommendations on the collection of data on future Election Day Surveys. These consist of general recommendations as well as recommendations pertaining to specific tables and categories of election information.

General Recommendations

1. **Survey timeline.** The late distribution of the 2004 Election Day Survey resulted from delays in the creation of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, as well as the time necessary to get the survey instrument accepted through the Paperwork Reduction Act requirements. We recommend that the EAC distribute the final 2006 Election Data Survey no later than eight weeks before the November election to allow enough time for state election directors to make data requests of local election administrators and for local administrations to set up the systems needed to collect the requested data.

   Late responses by state election directors were also a problem as some surveys were received more than three months after the deadline. We also recommend that the EAC make sure that deadlines are reasonable and then take steps to encourage state election directors to submit responses by those deadlines.

2. **Survey format.** Although 2004 Election Day Survey was distributed as a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, states were free to adjust the format of the spreadsheet as well as to submit documents in other formats. The variety of formats that were used resulted in a very costly and time consuming effort to standardize the survey responses for analysis.

   We recommend that the EAC incorporate into the design of the 2006 Election Day Survey fill-able cells and other techniques to obtain election data in a more uniform format to reduce the amount of data processing. A more uniform format would also provide greater assurances that the survey responses were tabulated accurately.

   A password-protected Internet survey could be designed to reduce the amount of processing required for survey responses. By creating an internet-based survey, we could produce quality assurance reports in real time, which will help state election directors identify data entry errors as the data was submitted.

3. **Statistics in elections.** Back in 1978, the Principal Investigator this project was a subcontractor on a project for the Office of Election Administration of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) devoted to studying the use of statistics in elections.

For some reason the results of that study were never published. We recommend that the EAC revive the intent behind the earlier study and undertake a research effort to document the importance of statistics and audits in the elections process. This study could form the basis of that future work.

4. **Uniform election information.** It is clear that different states and localities keep track of different statistics that use different words to describe them. In other states, the excuse is given that their state law doesn't require the information so they don't collect it. This study has clearly pointed out that there needs to be some uniformity in information on the elections process. We recommend that the EAC use whatever influence it has to ensure that uniformity.

   To further the goal of having uniform information on the elections process, we also recommend that the EAC convene a meeting of all state election directors to discuss the results of this report.

5. **Precinct-level data.** Despite the difficulties in gathering the county and jurisdiction level data for this report, the gross level of the data made meaningful analysis of some of the information impossible. Demographic analysis was impaired due to the lack of large enough concentrations of different characteristics. Studying the malfunctions of different voting equipment and their impacts on different groups is impossible when data is at the jurisdiction level. Therefore, we recommend that the EAC undertake the creation of a uniform precinct level database of election information for the country. Collecting basic registration, turnout and election returns will actually cut down in the data being requested via a survey, since much of the basic information is available as the results are being certified.

6. **Database files of election results (vote tallying software).** One of the difficulties in gathering precinct level information involves the wide variety of formats of printed reports produced by vote tallying software. Keypunching of this information means that each county's information has to be analyzed and potentially formatted separately before a single number is entered. As part of the NIST development of voting equipment standards, we recommend that the EAC ensure that all vote tallying software be required to produce a database file of the election results and basic information outlined in this report. The EAC and NIST should outline the minimum geographic identifiers that should be in the database files, as well as the basic information. The basic information would include, among other items, both overvote and undervote counts for each office and contest on the ballot.

7. **Election Day Survey Report Updates.** Due to the time pressures of getting this initial report produced for the EAC and Congress, data holes and errors still exist in the information that forms the basis of this report. We recommend that the EAC fund a continuation of this project to work with the states to find and correct errors and fill in missing information. In addition, the Census Bureau will be producing their updated 2004 estimates for local jurisdictions in the summer. A version 2 of this report should be created with the new and improved information.

8. **Election audits.** In the accounting field, audits of data are a regular part of their business. The state of New Mexico has an auditing team that compiles and certifies all of their official election results. We recommend that the EAC produce a document or pamphlet that outlines various steps that state and local governments could undertake to ensure they have the proper data for each election. This auditing process should start at the precinct level on Election Day, and flow all the way to the state.

Summary of Recommendations in Part 2

The following recommendations were presented in part 2 of the report and are summarized below:

9. **Population data.** Recommendations on population data in Chapter 1 were as follows:

> That the EAC request information on voter eligibility requirements in the states and any changes to state law since the last federal election to better measure the eligible population.

> That the EAC request jurisdictions to provide estimates of eligible and ineligible persons. For example, some states use lists of felons to purge their registration rolls. Some states may have information on the number of overseas eligible citizens from sources such as tax records.

> That the EAC work with U.S. Census Bureau to obtain population and voting age population estimates and projections that will correspond with the general election calendar for counties and townships in Michigan, Wisconsin, and the six New England states. This will provide a uniform base from which an election analysis can be preformed.

> In past years, the Census Bureau produced state-level projections of voting age populations prior to the November general elections. This dataset was dropped in 2002. The EAC should encourage Congress and the Census Bureau to re-instate the program so that state and local governments would have benchmark data by which to compare their own information.

10. **Voter registration.** Recommendations on voter registration data in Chapter 2 were as follows:

> That the EAC in the future ask states and local election jurisdictions to keep counts of both "active" and "inactive" registrants and to report both numbers, plus the "total number of registered voters" to the EAC.

> The differences in how states and localities report registration counts has a significant impact on any study of voting. Whether a jurisdiction uses only "active" voters or chooses to combine "inactive" and "active" voters has a huge bearing on how the jurisdiction is perceived to carry out it's registration responsibilities. When compared to voting age population estimates, registration rates can vary wildly dependent upon how a state reports its registration numbers.

That the EAC also collect the number of persons who registered to vote on Election Day for those jurisdictions in states with Election Day registration.

That the EAC create a table of the eligibility requirements for both voter registration and for voting in each state. These requirements would produce variables for further analysis.

That the EAC investigate the rules and procedures used in each state under which a registered voter is moved from "active" to "inactive" status. Data on the number of voters who are removed from a voter registration file, as well as the number of voters that were transferred to another jurisdiction could also be collected.

11. **Voter turnout.** Recommendations on voter turnout data in Chapters 3 and 4 were as follows:

That the EAC use its influence to get all states and local governments to compile a true voter turnout number for each election.

Despite the EAC's efforts over the past year, the American people still doesn't know the total number of persons who showed up and participated in the 2004 election. A handful of states and local jurisdictions still don't collect an actual turnout number, instead believing the incorrect assumption that one just needs to tally up the number of votes received by all candidates for the highest office. This study, once again, points out the fallacy of such a belief.

That the EAC on future surveys make it clear to states and local jurisdictions when component questions are part of the whole election process and should sum to 100 percent. Clearer instructions and more timely information should be conveyed to the states and jurisdictions so that counts on the various methods of voting can be kept separately.

That the EAC consider merging the UOCAVA (Military and Overseas Absentee Ballot) survey into the Election Day survey.

12. **Absentee ballots.** Recommendations on absentee ballots in Chapter 5 were as follows:

That the EAC combine UOCAVA questionnaire with the Election Day Survey. We believe that most jurisdictions disregarded the Election Day Survey instructions to separate military and overseas absentee statistics from other absentee statistics and provided statistics on all absentee voters. Combining the two surveys would reduce confusion.

That the EAC collect additional information on how absentee ballots are requested, returned and counted. For example, some states allow permanent absentee balloting, which may be related to increased rates of absentee ballot requests. Some states permit voters with absentees to return absentee

ballots to the polling place on Election Day, and in some cases these ballots may not have been counted as a returned absentee ballot.

That the EAC clarify the absentee ballot definition, particularly for the case of Oregon, which runs its elections by mail.

That the EAC ask all states keep counts of absentee returns separate from results cast at the polling place. However, absentee results need to be available at the smallest geographic level (preferable by precinct), so that full demographic analysis can take place. Reporting absentee returns at only the county level or at a ballot style level muddles any meaningful analysis possible.

13. **Provisional ballots (Chapter 6).** Recommendations on provisional ballots were as follows:

That the EAC collect separate statistics on challenged and provisional ballots

That the EAC collect state and jurisdictional rules and statistics regarding how ballots cast by first time voters without identification are processed on Election Day

That the EAC collect statistics on the number of first time voters who do not provide identification, how many vote a provisional or challenged ballot, and how many of these types of ballots are counted

That the EAC collect information on the procedures used to ascertain the validity of a provisional ballot—for example, what is the timing of the verification process

That the EAC collect information regarding how jurisdictions notify individuals concerning the disposition of their provisional ballot.

14. **Drop-off, overvotes, and undervotes.** Recommendations on drop-off and overvotes and undervotes in Chapters 7 and 8 were as follows:

That the EAC gather actual election results to better understand how patterns of electoral competition factor into drop-off.

Many who study and opine about civic engagement in the United States focus on participation in elections as the most fundamental act of civic engagement. Yet little data has been collected regarding voters' overall voting experience and the decisions they face as they work their way down the ballot.

We recommend that the EAC establish a clearinghouse for the collection of sample ballots or images of actual ballot images used within jurisdictions. Documenting and observing the appearance of actual ballots, coupled with actual election results and turnout data, will aid understanding of the various factors that ultimately lead to voter choices to participate in elections appearing on a ballot.

That the EAC encourage all state and local election officials to produce separate counts of overvotes and undervotes, for at least their own internal review of the election.

A number of jurisdictions did not provide overvotes and undervotes, and a full-scale audit of election results should incorporate the study of both all overvotes and all undervotes. Too many times vendors have told election officials that providing such information only confuses the process. But the data help form the heart of determining whether or not problems exist in a given election.

15. **Voting equipment.** Recommendations on voting equipment in Chapters 9, 10 and 11 were as follows:

That the EAC collect information on who provides on-going support of the voting system to the jurisdictions. In many instances, this will be the same as the manufacturer of who sold them the equipment. This may assist in filling out the blank information received by the EAC for half the nation on who is the manufacturer.

That the EAC should seek more detailed information on voting equipment devices and manufacturers from all jurisdictions. The use of generic voting equipment type categories by some states prevents a complete picture of the voting equipment market in the United States.

That the EAC collect information on where ballots are tallied, be they at the precinct or at a central county location. This would allow a more complete analysis to be done on whether drop-off or overvotes are less likely to occur when the voters are present and have an opportunity to correct voting mistakes.

That the EAC collect information on the number of polling booths or actual voting devices that are used at election time. Confusion over question wording in the 2004 survey prevents proper analysis from being conducted on one potential cause of the long lines in various states.

That the EAC institute a more extensive program designed to investigate reported voting equipment problems. During the late 1970s, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) sent investigator Roy Saltman to a number of jurisdictions around the country that had problems with punch card voting systems. His very detailed reports provided background information, an unbiased description of the problems encountered, reasons on why the problems occurred, and descriptions of solutions instituted. With the wide ranging rumors and reports of voting equipment problems that came out of the 2004 elections, there is a lack of full information to substantiate or dispel the rumors.

16. **Poll workers.** Recommendations on poll workers in Chapter 12 were as follows:

That the EAC change how the number of poll workers is collected.

States vary with regards to requiring poll workers to work all day or in shifts. This administrative procedure by itself would be valuable information to collect. However, in calculating number of poll workers per polling place or precinct, a comparable metric needs to be formulated across jurisdictions, such as the average number within polling places during the day. Similarly, the number of polling places or precincts with staffing concerns should be considered in terms of inadequate coverage of a shift or for the entire day.

That the EAC collect information about poll worker training and special skills required of poll workers, such as: (a) How are poll workers trained? Is training mandatory? And how many hours is a typical training class? (b) Is multilingual training provided for poll workers in Section 203 covered jurisdictions? And (c) are they compensated for their time and at what rate?

17. **Polling places.** Recommendations on polling places in Chapter 13 were as follows:

That the EAC collect the number of early voting and Election Day polling places. With the increasing popularity of early voting, the distinction between early voting and Election Day precincts will need to be carefully defined and the growth or decline of polling places will need to be monitored.

That the EAC begin asking about the existence of vote centers, how many precincts they cover, and determine whether returns and other data are consolidated in how they are reported or are able to be kept separate for the individual precincts. The advent in the past year of the concept of vote centers, or locations where voters can come from multiple precincts, is a new development in election administration and something that merits study.

That the EAC collect information on criteria for establishing precincts. For example, what does each state law require as a maximum or minimum size for a voting precinct? This information would be useful to identify standards and best practices among jurisdictions.

That the EAC collect information on the number of consolidated polling places, i.e., polling places servicing more than one voting precinct, and collect procedures for the establishment of consolidated polling places. Consolidated polling places were identified as one potential cause of voter confusion that might lead to the casting of an invalid provisional ballot.

That the EAC collect information on individual voting precincts and polling places, e.g., the number of registered voters and the number of votes cast in each voting precinct and polling place.

A populous jurisdiction may have several hundred voting precincts within its boundaries, and jurisdiction averages may mask significant variation across voting precincts and polling places. If the unit of analysis was the precinct or polling place, additional characteristic may be collected, such as

ease of access of polling places, recent changes to precincts boundaries, and polling place location.

That the EAC collect information on "split precincts" in the states that use them. Split precincts or polling places were identified as one potential cause of voter confusion that might lead to the casting of an invalid provisional ballot.

18. **Disability:** Recommendations on polling place accessibility in Chapter 14 were as follows:

That the EAC clarify the wording of questions about accessible polling locations so that it is clear the information being sought relates to the physical polling site and not the type of equipment used.